

Lesson in history

For most Americans, the Fourth of July holiday will pass with little thought for the historic significance of the date. Like most other modern holidays, we enjoy time with family and great food without truly considering the underlying events that should be the motivating cause for our celebration.

This trend is a shame because July 4, 1776, was most certainly a day for the ages. By renouncing their allegiance to the King of England and proclaiming the birth of a new United States of America, the brave signers of the Declaration of Independence started a chain of events that would quite literally change the world.

Other than the writings in the Bible, the eloquent lines of the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence may be the most influential writing of the last 200 years. As Thomas Jefferson wrote for posterity, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

These powerful words started a revolution in America, led to the fall of the European monarchies and would eventually motivate the human spirit to spread democracy all over the globe. What are these "revolutionary" concepts that changed history forever?

The Declaration of Independence is based on a belief that citizens "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights" and that governments "derive their just powers from the consent of the governed." These were radical concepts in 1776. Prior to that time, the Western monarchies were structured on a belief that all power flowed from God to a divine King who bestowed rights to the people. Our founding fathers rejected this idea and argued that all rights flow from God to the citizens, who then may choose whether to grant certain rights to the government. As this idea spread, the divine worship of kings and queens gradually ended, flawed monarchs began to be held accountable for their actions, and legislative democracies began springing up all over the world.



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Fire up the grill, get some rest and enjoy the fireworks. While you are enjoying the day, take a moment to remember why we are celebrating.

The Declaration is based on the belief that certain rights are "unalienable" or as we would say in more modern language "inalienable." Webster's Dictionary defines inalienable to mean "not capable of being given up or transferred." In other words, our founding fathers believed that certain rights, the rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," are inalienable and cannot be given up under any circumstances. This radical concept led to the establishment of the Bill of Rights in our Constitution, which has served as the foundation of individual liberty in America for more than 200 years.

Lastly, the Declaration of Independence is based on a belief that "all men are created equal." It would be nearly another 200 years before this concept became a reality for all Americans. However, this revolutionary statement in 1776 was a foundation for the abolitionist movement that ended slavery, the suffrage movement that fought to give women the right to vote and the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Yes, July Fourth is an extraordinary day in our nation's history. Fire up the grill, get some rest and enjoy the fireworks. While you are enjoying the day, take a moment to remind your kids (or grandkids) why we are celebrating.

Messer represents the 57th District, including most of Shelby County, in the Indiana House. This is a reprint of his popular column commemorating July 4, 2003.

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